



A Legend

of
Venice



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George A. Stubbley

From C. W. E. Marshall add
with his sincere regards.

WOLFVILLE, N. S. CANADA

A Legend of Venice,

Told in rhyme,

By WILLIAM E. MARSHALL.

"An echo of thee in the north-wind sung."

—Keats' Isabella.

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The following legend is beautifully told in the March number of "The Ladies' Home Journal" for this year. Since reading it there, as a prose poem, I have had additional enjoyment in arranging it in the rhymed stanza of Keats' "Isabella;" and I hope the air, or narrative of the song, may sound pleasantly clear and distinct, and the variations, or excursions of my fancy, appear in keeping with the theme.

W. E. M.

Bridgewater, Nova Scotia.
December 24th, 1907.

A Legend of Venice.

I.

Sweet Adeline, the fairest, loveliest maid
In Venice,—nobly born to wealth untold—
And Theodore, a gondolier by trade,
—A handsome youth of nature's finest mould—
Looked in each other's eyes, and straight betrayed
That each the other loved. It is an old
Old story, how these lovers conquered death
With one last lingering sigh of mortal breath.

II.

'Twas early on a radiant Easter morn,
When Adeline, in maiden-white attire,
With jewelled girdle flashing like the dawn,
And nestling rose that blushed with heart's desire,
Adown the marble stairs pride's tread had worn,
Passed silently; her veiled soul afire
With zeal, to tell a rosary of love
To all the blessed saints in heaven above.

III.

For was not Theodore—the gift of God—
To be her pilot on the holy way!
Already there, bending his shoulders broad,
With hurried ease he steers, and now doth stay
His eager boat with loop of silken cord;
And now doth re-arrange with seeming play,
The cushioned seat;—while Adeline will read
Her missal book with eyes that do not heed.

IV.

An age she waited in a moment's dream,
Until his hand, trembling with gallant haste,
Had led her safe. And now upon the stream,
Swan-like, they glide, leaving a splendid waste
Of mingling beauty, million-hued, to gleam
In ripples o'er the mirrored way effaced;
And yet would Adeline and Theodore
See in their whispered nothings sweeter lore.

V.

His voice was soft and wistful as a lute :
Her every word was melody divine.
How could they otherwise than be the fruit
Of tender verse and haunting honeyed line ?
The fancy feigns that many a lover's suit
Was won with murmuring of sonnet fine,
Wherein those imaged hearts were ever warm
With pleading love that will forever charm.

VI.

O for a touch of him whose name doth dwell
In liquid numbers, gushing full and clear
In saddest song of love-lorn Isabel !
That some rich meaning might be given here
To deathless love, under the Old-World spell
Of beauty 'prisoned in this legend dear.
Haply, because the story aches the heart,
The gentle reader may forgive its art.

VII.

Love's ferryman is wandering on the shore,
Fretting the time with empty happiness.
Love's passenger, though in her heart she bore
Her lover's heart, doth in the temple miss
His presence so, she prayeth: "Heaven no more
Were heaven, if we should be in separate bliss!
Ah Saints, and holy Virgin, ease my eyes
With sight of wedded love in Paradise!"

VIII.

And lo! a raptured ray descended there,
And more than mortal loveliness enshrined
The maiden Adeline. She rose from prayer,
—An angel vision to the pious blind—
And in her passing, blessed the very air
With charity of love to all mankind:
'Twas told, how beggars at the temple gate
That day were clothed and fed in royal state.

IX.

And Theodore, the gondolier!—How pale,
Death pale, and moist as mortal agony,
Then suddenly all dark with rushing zeal;
As though it were some doomful poignancy
Of heart, that pierc-ed him with swif assail.
Ah! all his heart he uttered in a sigh:
And love was born!—great love for Adeline—
Immortal love, that death can never wean.

X.

“Ah, Jesu Domine!”—he prays in thought,—
“I love the Lady Adeline with all
My soul, and in her eyes, if ever aught
Were true, a love as infinite doth call!
Must love be perjured, and forever fraught
With misery of life unbearable,
Because her father’s rich, and hath a pride
That would a murder do ere it would chide?”

XI.

"'Twere sweeter far, for me to die unshrived,
Than to profane my love with craven care!"
And Adeline!—for so her heart hath thrived,
Upon a sigh—her beauty groweth there,
All wondrous with expectancy arrived;
And like a rose that loves the wooing air,
Her parting lips doth yield the bliss of love—
The unseen bliss that only love may prove.

XII.

And there were panting words and dear consent,
In melting language all too incomplete
For record cold, save with the heart's intent;
And yet, we know those lovers vowed to meet
That night in secret place, for love's content:
—With love content, though love were life's defeat—
Ah, how they dallied at the palace quay!
Saying: "O would 'twere night, instead of day!"

XIII.

And Theodore, that day, was like a bird
Leaving its happy mate in downy nest,
Yet ever flitting near with song that stirred
Her there to chirp and peep in fluttering quest :
He sang an old refrain, a ditty weird
With mystery of love that may not rest
Its yearning spirit long in earthly room :
'La Belle Dame Sans Merci is true love's doom.'

XIV.

And when 'twas dark, and all the palace slept,
He tied his boat, and climbed the balcony ;
And like a thief of love he softly crept,
And 'gainst the lattice leaned so hungrily . . .
There was a sobbing sigh—as though love wept—
And then, Ah ! then there was great ecstasy ;
And lovers' happiness in lady's bower,
That night did linger till the dawning hour.

XV.

For Adeline and Theodore were young,
And beautiful as dream, and richly made
For love in Venice--Whom the World hath sung
These thousand years in verse that will not fade.
It was in Venice Desdemona hung
Upon the swarthy Moor impassion-ed :
And Venice, in her prime imperial,
Was life, and love, and death, in carnival.

XVI.

All blissful nights those lovers' meetings were,
All full of blissful promise was each day ;
He had no thought but it did turn to her,
She bade her bosom secret with him stay ;
Truly, they seemed twin souls that could not stir
The air of heaven, save with a single ray ;
And thus they might have lived and loved unknown
To earthly song,—which only makes sweet moan—

A LEGEND OF VENICE.

11

XVII.

Had not, one night, (O love betraying night !)

The lady's brothers spied young Theodore
Upon his pilgrimage. It was a sight

Unthought to them ; and hurrying oaths they swore ;
And their all baffled eyes were fierce with light

Of vengeance born, as near the bolted door
They crouched and listened to love's pleading voice,
And heard consenting love with love rejoice.

XVIII.

But after that,—love's silence lasting there,—

The brothers 'gan to fret with strain-ed nerve,
And ghostly chilliness of midnight air ;

And whispering an easy plan to serve
Their thirsting purpose soon, they pledged the care
Of lovers' fate with hearts that would not swerve ;

And crawled away, each to his dreamless bed,
To sleep the sweeter for a murder bred.

XIX.

The red sun roused them on the morrow morn,
And they rose up as on a holiday;
The red blood tingled with a joy new-born,
As with their jewelled daggers they did play;
And when upon their searching eyes did dawn
The love-light of their sister gloriously,
With ruddy zest, they mocked her love divine,
In golden loving-cups of blood-red wine.

XX.

And then they sought their aged father's ear,
And told him all that they had seen and heard;—
Saying they deemed it wise that he should hear.
Their father's pallid face to marble stirred,
And his thin voice came deadly cold and drear:
—As though a frozen heart were in each word—
"If in your veins a drop of my blood flows,
This man shall die the death that no one knows."

XXI.

Night came, and covered the sweet eyes of heaven ;
And the sea moaned, like its sad heaving breast
Had pain of soul for all its vast unshriven
Dead ; and the winds were torn as with unrest
Of houseless ghosts, lost wailing spirits, driven
Hither and thither by sins unconfessed :
It was a night for evil death to seek
Its prey of love, and darkest vengeance wrea

XXII.

" Ah Theodore, my love ! I had such strain
Of heart, lest some mischance might beggar thee
And me of love this night, that words are vain
To tell my heart-ease in love's companie."
" My Adeline, Belov-ed ! I would gain
Thy side, though sudden death encompassed me :
So do I love thee dear, thou art my goal
Of deathless love beyond the grave's control."

XXIII.

And often would the lovers breathe farewell,
Only to cling more close in tenderness,
Until, dreamlike, some power invisible
Compelled a last adieu. Ah, piteous stress !
For such a swift heart-rending doom befell
Young Theodore, he did but seem to bless
His love with all his heart, in one long sigh
To Adeline,—who thought it love's goodbye.

XXIV.

She knew not that he sank upon the stair
A streaming corpse, but met his speeding soul
With airy kiss and heavenly whispered prayer ;
Then to her fragrant chamber, soft, she stole,
To sleep and dream her lover still was there ;
The while her brothers, in their bloody role,
Gloating in darkness o'er their victim's wail,
Made haste to hide it from the coming day.

XXV.

They left their daggers quivering in its heart,
And dragged the warm limp body to the boat,
Where like a huddled heap flung from a cart
It lay, until Murano's yawning throat
Was reached; and there, with horrid fumbling art,
They staked it with stones, lest it should float,
And slid it overboard; and thence it sped
To find a place among the murdered dead.

XXVI.

Some of them stirred; and one grinned horribly,
And one did lift its eyeless face all pale,
And one dark form half rose, then helplessly
Fell back again. O what a mournful tale,
If those unburied souls their agony
Of death could speak! Full surely, 'twould avail
With pitying heaven to give them painless sleep,
Till the loud trump shall call from deep to deep.

XXVII.

The murderers homeward turned; and laboured hard
Ere dawn should point red fingers at the blood
Upon the stair, and spoil their heart's reward
In fiendish revel, when next night they stood
Outside love's portal never more unbarred
For love,—now love lies weltering 'neath the flood.
"Ha ha!" they said: "The rarest sport will be
To hear our sister in her misery."

XXVIII.

Like evil things scenting a new-made grave,
They skulked, and squatted at her chamber door,
To feast on woful sounds that sob and rave;—
As though some one were crazed and walked the floor,
And pressed the lattice with cold lips that crave
A boon of death,—since love doth come no more—
Only to hear the dead-march of the sea,
And the sad night-wind sighing fearfully.

XXIX.

But ha, the brothers had no glee that night!
Such ghostly knowledge came upon them there,
The hot blood in them went all cold with fright,
And they quick crossed themselves in chattering prayer.
God's truth! It was a murdered man did plight
Great love unto their sister, who did spare
No tenderness of word or sweet embrace,—
Saying she'd kiss the sea-chill from his face.

XXX.

"It is the gondolier!"—they whisper-ed—
"The loving youth we stabbed last night to death!
Curse him! Why hath he left his watery bed
To woo our sister with a ghastly wraith?
We should have shrouded him in coffin lead,
And with an ave sealed his mortal breath!"
So muttered they, and stole below to hide,—
Shivering with graveyard fears, yet eager-eyed.

XXXI.

Now chanticleer upraised his shrillest strain,
And little birds their gossip 'gan to sing,
And at the palace rail love kissed again :
The brothers saw their sister vanishing,
And heard the long-drawn sigh of love's refrain,
But nothing else ;—and with strange wondering,
That shuddered at the mists of morn, they went
To tell their father how the night was spent.

XXXII.

They woke him from an old man's phantom dream,
To hear that murdered love gave death the lie.
Their story done, he told of fading gleam
In dying eyes and oozing spirit's sigh,
But said he never knew a soul redeem
Its pledge of life from death's dark forfeitry :
Unsanctioned love had crazed their sister's brain ;
He would devise a solace for her pain.

XXXIII.

Upon her father's summons, Adeline
Came with fond court'sy; and against his cheek,
Wrinkled and white, her soft rich bloom did lean;
And with her scarlet-berried lips did seek
His love so sweetly, that a face unseen
For years shone on him there, and made him weak:
It was a mother's loveliness that pled
For Adeline . . . Ah, pity she was dead.

XXXIV.

The weeping willow, full of leafy woe,
Hangs o'er her sculptured urn; the cuckoo sings
Its boding sorrow, mournfully and low;
The heavy cloud a wreath-ed shadow flings
Upon the sunken mound; and to and fro
The faded grass the pale moth spreads its wings:
Come hither grief, and cry "Alas, the day!"
For love and death soon will be one for aye.

XXXV.

"Daughter! Thy ghostly father telleth me
Thou hast not been to holy shrift of late:
And since this so unwonted lack in thee
Grieves his good heart, do thou no longer wait.
Perhaps, unknown to us, some enemy
Of thy sweet soul envies thy mortal state."
So spake the aged parent to his child,
Who—save in love—was dutiful and mild.

XXXVI.

She gently answered, she would do his will;
And gazing in his face with radiant air,—
As though a thought of heavenly love did thrill
Her soul—she said: "The Church hath kindly care
For all,—the happy folk, as well as ill,—
Since the dear Virgin-mother reigneth there:
And haply, there, my heart, all fault confessing,
Shall take from holy love increase of blessing."

XXXVII.

With clasp-ed hands and raptured upturned face,
She kneels awhile in silent adoration,
Before the blessed Virgin's pictured grace,—
Lit with the glory of divine creation,
By some great artist soul inspired to trace
The Motherhood of God in mediation.
Ora pro nobis! O thou Queen of Heaven,
Who hast to countless hearts love's comfort given!

XXXVIII.

O heart of love! What mayest thou confess,
But that thou knowest nothing else save love,
And that to love is only happiness?—
The great white flame, wherein life's splendours move
In ever burning, unconsuming bliss:
The call of heaven to earth—which all may prove:
O heart of love, Thou art as strong as death!
Thy spirit liveth in love's fleeting breath.

XXXIX.

"Dear child, thy heart is open unto me.

Thou hast a secret lover, Theodore :
Doth not in this thy conscience trouble thee?"

"Nay father, it doth not!—Though I forbore
To tell. Thou knowst 'tis God's secrecy

Hath touched my lips! Wouldst have me that deplore?
—Mother of God! Whatever be my fate,
I cannot from my love be separate!"

XL.

"My child! Thou art in unforgiven sin,

Except thou wilt renounce thy lover here!"

"Ah, never that! Even now my heart doth win

Heaven's joy—for perfect love hath cast out fear."

"Daughter, I cannot sanction this! Thou'st been

Deceived! He'd marry thee, wert thou so dear!"

"My father, he hath kept far better faith;

For we have sworn to love in life and death."

XLI.

Dark horror seized upon the listening priest;—

For he heard hollow laughter in his prayer;
And knew the maiden met in nightly tryst,

A spectred lover sworn to seek her there.—
And hasting like a saint from sin releast,

He told her father he must penance bear,
And pay for requiem mass, and holy charm,
To lay the ghost, and rid his house of harm.

XLII.

The anxious father many a penance sought;

—Groaning in spirit as his gold he spends—

The priest went lean and piously distraught,

Until he found a secret hour to cleanse
The haunted room with holy water, brought

From Jordan's sacred stream, for wondrous ends:

For Adeline did seldom venture forth;—

Since night meant love, the day was little worth.

XLIII.

And now they watch beside love's bolted door,
And on the moonlit quay the brothers wait.
The priest, forsooth, believed, that nevermore
The ghost would pass beyond its mortal fate;
But ah! He could not know, how love, so sure,
Is boundless as the faith it doth create:
Oh mighty love! 'Twas thine unconscious breath
Did burst the eternal barriers of death!

XLIV.

And now love cometh home! The watchers heard
Soft utterances within. And fearfully,
They listened to a voice more sweet than bird:
It was the maiden in her ecstasy!
And then the lover's voice, and deathless word:
What tenderness from love's immensity!
Yet none of them saw anything that night;—
Nor did a shadow stir the pale moonlight.

XLV.

"O horrible! My child hath wed a curse,
And black perdition on this house will bring!
God's mercy should have stifled her at nurse,
Ere the sweet babe could love an evil thing;
For now,—O agony!—I must do worse!—
And God forgive me, priest, or hell will sing!
Sons! Go and hire murder's two meanest slaves
To drown your sister in Murano's waves!"

XLVI.

And with the morning's sun came Adeline
To greet her father, as she loved to do.
(O my rude muse! Thou must not touch that scene,
Though thou wilt dare to tell the story through!)
Her father said: "Here, take these flowers. I mean
Them for the Virgin of the sea,—and you
Will carry them to her. Delay no more.
A gondola awaits you at the door."

XLVII.

So from her father, tremulous and bent,

She took the sacred flowers. And like a bride
Going at last to life's great sacrament,

She on the death-boat stepped, and down the tide,
To love's eternity, all joyous went ; --

And to her happy heart the oars replied :
For she was dreaming of the latest kiss
Upon her lips, and of returning bliss.

XLVIII.

Long while she dreamed, --- with her great dreamy eyes
Upon the flowers, red as the Virgin's heart, ---
Till, on a sudden, she felt strange surprise ;

And looking round, she said : " Have you your part
Mistaken ? Towards the sea my journey lies :

But this goes to Murano's loveless mart."
" Lady," the boatman said, " You need not fear.
Your father ordered thus. Your way lies here."

XLIX.

She held her peace, though it distressed her why
 Her father had not told her all his will;
 And to herself she oft made gentle sigh,
 And in her heart she prayed: "O thou art still
 My guardian, blessed Virgin, ever nigh!
 And thou wilt shield thy helpless child from ill.
 Forever with my love, I nothing crave
 For thou dost know I love beyond the grave."

L.

Above the walls of dark Murano's isle,
 The cypress trees uprear their heavy gloom:
 The dying maiden looked on them awhile,
 And thought of lovers sobbing at the tomb.
 "Dear God!" she murmured, with love's pitying smile,
 "For him and me death hath no severed doom."
 And yet, she shudders. Ah! the boat moves slow;—
 Through water thick with crime 'tis hard to row.

LI.

"Why do we stop?" "Lady, this is the end"

And though the wretches each wore troubled look,
Cold murder was to each an only friend:

They thought of pity slain, and courage took.
The maiden rose,—as if a deadly hand

Were laid on her, and with death passion shook:
Yet nothing touched her there. Only her doom
Had brushed her, on its way to chilly tomb.

LII.

And yet, she uttered no despairing prayer:—

She was too much in love to be afraid.

"You need not touch me: I, myself, will dare

To die for love." So spake the sweetest maid
Death ever drew, for love's sake, to his lair;

And doubting not of the dear Virgin's aid,
Nor of her lover's troth, her eyes did rest
Their angel gaze upon the water's breast.

LIII.

But, quick, her soul grew faint with deathly sight,
And all her heart rushed out in anguished cry.
Yet 'twas a moment only she had fright ;
For see, her lovely face is lit with joy.
She knows those rayless eyes that seek the light,
And whose red lips are paler than the sea :—
It is her waiting lover Theodore ;
Soon will her arms enfold him evermore.

LIV.

She is so eager for her breathless weal,
The murderers forget why they were sent,
And both stretch forth their hands with mercy's zeal.
"Ah no!" she said,—and they 'gan tears to vent—
"Do not be sad for me. Death cannot steal
The love to which I go." And down she went ;
Nor any bubble came, of her sweet breath,
To tell those sin-saved souls that she met death.

LV.

They crossed themselves, and stared in wondering awe ;
—With heavenly light the water was agleam—
And there, within the pearly depths, they saw
The lovers clasped in love's immortal dream.
And ever since, the hallowed tide doth draw
Those vowing love beyond death's shoreless stream :
But only those, who have love's faith, may see
These storied lovers, so love telleth me.



